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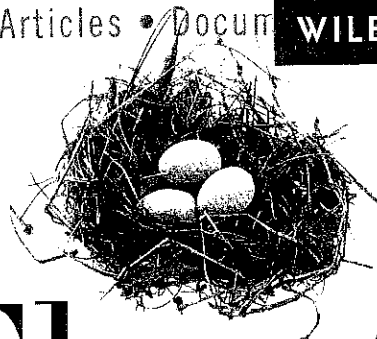
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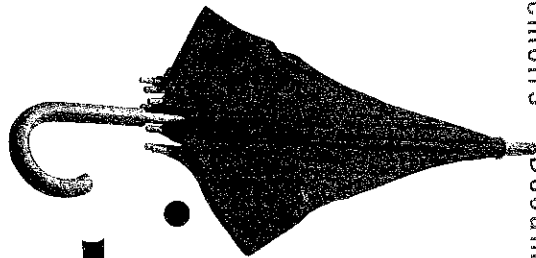
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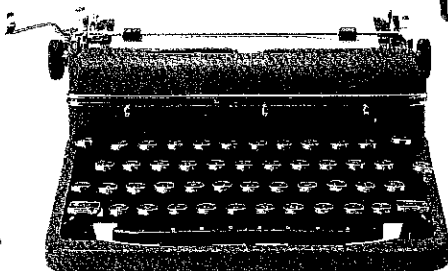
History



The Art of Creative Nonfiction



Writing and Selling
the Literature
of Reality



LEE GUTKIND

Documentary Drama • Literary Journalism • Narrative History

The Devices of Creative Nonfiction

3.1 Description

The term *literary license* is often used in reference to writers who manipulate truth and accuracy in stories—what really happened—to enhance dramatic impact and, therefore, to make a story more readable or exciting.

Creative nonfiction writers, however, are permitted a different form of literary license: to use the literary devices previously and exclusively available to the fiction writer (and the poet and playwright) in the writing of their true and accurate creative nonfiction stories. In other words, nonfiction writers cannot alter the facts, but they can capture and present them much more dramatically.

What are these literary devices to which I refer? Think about some of the novels mentioned in this book so far, such as *The Bridges of Madison County* or *Jaws*. Or stroll through the stacks of your public library for favorite titles; browse your neighborhood bookstore for the newest and hottest best-sellers.

What do you remember enjoying about the books and stories you liked best? What literary or writing techniques are evident? There is a great deal of dramatic description of people and places (and even feelings) in the best novels, short stories, and essays, for one thing. Who

will ever forget the massive and overwhelming onslaught of the whales in *Moby Dick* or the bloody endless battles in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Observing and recording such dramatic description is a hallmark of creative nonfiction prose.

Here is a description of an event, starting to an unaware reader, but an everyday occurrence in the life of a farm veterinarian named Wendy Freeman, from my essay "Difficult Decisions," published in the literary journal *Prairie Schooner* in the Fall 1966 issue. It offers a vivid and memorable window of reality to readers—a license more often employed in fiction.

Freeman locates a spot in the barn directly beside an electric outlet and plugs in the dis-budding iron. She walks outside, opens a pen in which two calves are waiting, selects a brown spotted calf ("The kind that makes chocolate milk," she jokes) and brings it inside. Working quickly, she shaves the hair from around the horns, then reaches into her medicine bag for Lidocaine, a pain blocker, which she has already siphoned into a hypodermic needle. She injects the Lidocaine into the calf's head directly around the horn.

Next comes the electric dis-budding iron, which resembles a branding iron, round, like a large "O," not unlike a packaged donut with a hole in the middle. She grabs the calf's ear, wedges its head against her body, inserts the "O" of the iron through the calf's horn, and then, bringing the iron slowly downward, digs the hot iron into the calf's little head.

First there is a whiff of bluish white smoke, and then the dank, stark stench of burning fur. Then comes the richer more primal aroma of roasting skin, followed by the sound of searing bone, as she applies increasing pressure. She twists the iron back and forth repeatedly until smoking copper colored rings show through above the ears. It looks as if the smoke is emanating from the calf's head, as if the soul of this tiny helpless animal has suddenly been apprehended by the devil.

Another example from my book *Bike Fever*, this time from the rain-soaked seat of a motorcycle, is excerpted below. As you read, remember that these incidents are true and quite common, but they are rendered to the reader in the dramatic and descriptive manner of the fiction writer setting a scene and embellishing an event.

"Days and Nights: Heading South"

Air leaked into my rainsuit and inflated me. The rainsuit collar flapped fast in the wind, plastic against plastic, sounding like the propeller of a small airplane. After a while, the rainsuit ripped from the force of the wind, and water soaked the jacket under it. The weight of the wet jacket was heavy on my shoulders. The wetness stuck to my warm skin and I shivered as I rode. Periodically, I wiped water from my face shield, drenching my gloves. The water rolling from the gauntlets of my gloves swept under the shield and soaked my face. My cheeks started to itch and I scratched them with my wet gloves. The rain, blown by the wind, pricked my chin and rolled down my neck. Cold water puddled on the seat, shriveling my crotch. Trucks coming in the opposite direction punched me with mud, while my tires skidded over the pavement on water mixed with oil leaked from hot engines. The brake linings got wet and grabbed dangerously. The water, rolling off the seat, drained down my leg, filling my boot.

Burt and I were riding our motorcycles on Skyline Drive near Staunton, Virginia, and it had been raining for eight straight days.

Three hours out of Pittsburgh, the rain had started. We detoured south into Cumberland, Maryland, then into West Virginia, but the rain kept up. We went northeast back into Pennsylvania, then south into West Virginia and Virginia, but the water dogged us. We stopped at taverns and diners along the way for television weather reports, then headed

toward the warm fronts, looking for a dry pocket in which to rest. During the day, rain soaked our gear. We couldn't cook at night. We bought plastic garbage bags to cover everything, but when the wind was strong, it ripped the plastic. Every morning we first found a town with a laundromat, and for twenty-five cents, bought some man-made sun.

On the eighth day, the fog came up in the Shenandoah Mountains. We traveled the whole day through fog that struck in our eyes and wafted over the road. We followed the road by watching the shapes of the trees that lined the edge of the pavement. I could see the wheels on my motorcycle as we crept through the mountains, but not where they touched the ground. I could see the glowing eyes of cars coming in the opposite direction, but never the exact shapes of the cars or the people inside. Sometimes I could see Burt's red taillight in front of me and sometimes I couldn't. It was the thickest fog I have ever seen. Creeping through it the whole day, we could make only fifty miles.

I have never been skydiving, but driving through that fog is how I would imagine it. We floated through the clouds, guided by the way the wheels sounded against the road; we could tell when we neared the edge of the road, because some of the pebbles spilling from the shoulder, swept up by the tires, would clink against our exhaust pipes.

And we relied on our memories of riding in the past. If you think back hard enough to a special day, when the sun was warm and you cruised a long mountain road, if you can remember how it was and can concentrate, then you can duplicate that ride even though you cannot see. Taking the turns just as you have so many times before, leaning just enough, straightening slowly, feeling for the right balance, rolling that way. You don't always need eyes to ride a motorcycle, as long as you have a good memory and the ability to recreate what you know you should see.

The persistence of the rain dulls your perceptions, but

the fog reactivates them. You can taste the rain in the fog. And since you cannot see trees, grass, and wildflowers, you smell them. There are actually lines in the fog; it is not just a milky haze; streams of fog of different shades come together to make a screen. It feels strangely warm against your face, slightly wet. You push away the fog with your hand and, like water, more flows in to take its place. Floating through the fog seems both prehistoric and futuristic; it is in that gap where earth loses contact with the heavens.

3.2 *Dialogue: Characters Who Communicate*

Another technique fiction writers employ to enhance reality and establish action is dialogue. In stories from the old masters, such as Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, or the new masters, such as Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates, people talk to one another endlessly, page after page, as in real life.

Traditional reporters will paraphrase the subjects they are interviewing and provide short sound bites within quotation marks to instill a sense of reality and authenticity, but in real life—and in creative nonfiction (often called the literature of reality)—people communicate with spoken words. Writers report or recreate entire conversations as in this scene from my upcoming book, called *An Unspoken Art: Profiles of Veterinary Life*:

After going through his getting-acquainted kissing dance with a pudgy brown springer spaniel suffering from chronic diarrhea, veterinarian Gene Solomon asks the heavyset, well-dressed woman, accompanied by her teenage-daughter, "Tell me what you feed her."

The woman gulps and lowers her head.

"Yes, tell him, Mother," the daughter says.

"Chicken."

"Chicken," Solomon nods calmly and writes something into the dog's chart. "Anything else?"

Once again, the woman gulps, as if she's been caught in an act that she had been trying to conceal, which, of course, is absolutely true. "Fruit," she says.

"Fruit?"

"Yes, raisins, bananas . . ."

"And kiwi," her daughter adds.

Solomon nods again, writes in the chart and carefully eyeballs the patient. The woman's daughter is now smiling widely, on the verge of laughter.

"Any normal food?" Solomon asks. He is straightforward and matter of fact. He does not make any attempt to call attention to this odd dietary regimen. "I mean, normal dog food?" he corrected himself.

Again the woman swallows. "Well . . . bagels," she says.

"Well," says Solomon calmly, "bagels are better than fruit and chicken, but if you intend to continue to feed her

chicken then take the skin off—and eliminate the dark meat."
"But she likes dark meat."

Solomon shrugs. "White meat only is best for your dog in the chicken category."

"She really prefers dark meat," the woman repeats.

"Well," says Solomon, "if she's that picky . . ."

"Okay, okay," says the woman, "I guess I can do that."

Now the daughter bursts out laughing. Solomon, however, remains calm and deadpan, regarding the situation with a professional distance, while continuing to pet and kiss the brown little dog with the floppy ears. The mother, who has been growing increasingly uncomfortable, is now blushing; she has moved far back into the corner of the examination room. She sinks down to the ground, covering her face with her hands. "What's wrong with you, Mother?" her daughter asks.

"Oh, I feel so stupid." Above her head on the wall is a fancy framed photograph with Solomon and his dog, Cathy. There's also a small bulletin board with dozens of photos of pets, pets and their owners, litters of dogs, and

paintings or drawings of pets, and a framed poem entitled "The Precious Gifts He Gives, A Tribute to Dr. Gene Solomon."

Solomon calls for a technician to retrieve the dog so that a few tests can be conducted, and then addresses the woman and her daughter about the many years of intestinal disease that their dog has suffered and how a consistent proper diet would help stabilize the dog's health—and increase its longevity. They spend a good deal of time discussing animals and nutrition, trading questions, answers, and ideas until the woman interrupts by asking, "What about grapes?"

"Well," says Solomon, continuing to be sincere and matter-of-fact simultaneously, without indicating signs of annoyance, "a springer spaniel's ideal diet will probably not include grapes . . ."

Now the woman addresses her daughter: "I really have to get Joel to stop feeding her French food on Saturday afternoon."

Solomon interjects: "I actually have less of a problem with croissants than I do fried chicken."

The woman looks up, hopefully. "So croissants are good for dogs then?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Solomon says.

By recording conversation, the creative nonfiction writer captures reality. This is how people communicate in everyday life. The interference of a reporter attempting to sound authentic while maintaining objectivity is eliminated. As in fiction writing, dialogue enhances action and characterization, while eliciting reader reaction through humor (as in the above example) or tragedy.

Here is a conversation between two distressed people at a breaking point in their lives, from my book, *Stuck in Time*.

It begins in social worker Debbie Rubin's office as she meets with Tom and Elizabeth Scanlon, whose daughter, Meggan, is mentally ill. Because of insurance limitations, Meggan cannot stay at Western Psych,

a hospital that has been helpful to Meggan in the past, and there are few options remaining, none of which seems workable. Technically, Meggan can return home, but Tom and Elizabeth have decided that this is unacceptable. They are ready to relinquish custody, if CYS (Children's and Youth Services) and Orphan's Court will allow such an action. Even if relinquishment is permitted, who will guarantee that Meggan is placed in a desirable facility? For that matter, does a desirable facility exist for Meggan Scanlon? And where will Meggan live until she can be placed? Time is running out for Tom and Elizabeth. The only interim solution is a transfer to Mayview State Hospital, which would be inappropriate.

"You look good in black," Tom Scanlon tells Debbie Rubin, as he settles into his seat, opposite her desk. Rubin smiles and swivels back and forth in her chair. In addition to her black suit, she is wearing new red shoes. I know they are new because I have never seen them before, and over the past year I have been in a position to notice a great number of Debbie Rubin's shoes. From my vantage point across the room, behind Debbie and opposite Tom and Elizabeth, I have noted that Debbie hides her feet under her desk and slips off her shoes whenever her therapy sessions become difficult. When she turns toward the Scanlons, her face will remain impassive despite the intensity of the experience, the sadness, or the confrontation that she will sometimes precipitate, but her toes are preoccupied—twirling, dangling, tangoing with her shoes.

Rubin is 40 years old. She has an eight-year-old son whose photograph sits in a gold and silver frame on her desk; her husband is a cardiologist at a large community hospital two miles from campus. Rubin was born and educated in Pittsburgh, but a dozen years ago moved with her husband to Boston, where she first worked as a psychiatric social worker. Following her husband back to Pittsburgh, she was offered a position on 3 West, the adolescent unit. Her father had been a social worker at

Western Psych; he retired in 1976 as director of the Social Work Department.

Elizabeth initiates the discussion by pointing out that Meggan continues to insist she is going home after her discharge from Western Psych. If they cannot get her into a special school or group or foster home through CYS in Pittsburgh, however, Elizabeth is contemplating a move to North Carolina, where her sister lives and where services for emotionally disturbed children are more readily available.

Suddenly, Elizabeth points her finger and speaks to Debbie Rubin accusingly: "If you make me take Meggan back home this time, I swear to God . . ." She pauses and takes a deep breath. "I won't take her back home—no."

Elizabeth takes a deep breath and begins again, taking a different tack. She says that it is becoming increasingly important to her that Meggan learn to achieve something—anything—at school, any school. "I am not looking for too much. I don't need her to become president of the United States or a brain surgeon. But she used to have such energy!

"Meggan is a terrific student. If you were a teacher, you would kill for a student like my daughter. She's creative, she's exciting—she's weird. She's always been appreciated more by adults than by the kids her own age, and she usually hooked herself into her favorite teacher. The kids thought she was strange. Well, for God's sake, I knew more than anyone how strange and weird she was. But I have always fought for her right to be different." Now tears are rolling down Elizabeth's cheeks. "Meggan is telling people in the unit that she is a vampire. This is her way of acknowledging that she will be forever different."

Debbie Rubin passes a box of Kleenex. Elizabeth nods appreciatively and dabs her eyes.

"And when is the worst possible time in life to feel different?" Rubin asks.

"When you are a teenager."

"What do you think Meggan is going to say when she

learns that she is really not coming home—that your willingness to relinquish your parental rights is for real?”

“I know that Megan knows that I love her. And that is a heck of a big step from one generation to another because when I was her age, my mother never made me feel that way. But,” Elizabeth adds, “your question is only theoretical. I don’t have any confidence that she is not going to come home—despite what you say.” Once again, Elizabeth looks accusingly at Debbie Rubin.

“I don’t know what to say to you about sending Megan to Mayview or anywhere else,” says Rubin. “I don’t have the answers right now.”

Elizabeth began describing the joyous state of their lives with Megan out of the house. “We have a wonderful family when the three of us—me and Tom and Doug—are together. Doug thinks I am a great mother.”

“Doug and I have never been closer,” says Tom.

“He’s our pride and joy. He gets into trouble from time to time, but he tells us the truth. Meg insults us.”

“What does it take to convince people to get her off the streets?” Tom asks. “Does she need to be gang-raped? Should we let her kill someone with a car?”

“If we had enough money our problems would be solved,” said Elizabeth. “But there’s nothing left; no college money, no savings. It all went to Megan’s therapists and her private schools.” The Scanlons are \$42,000 in debt, “completely at risk every day of our lives.”

Tom sighs, squirms, and turns to face the wall. “I have to abandon my daughter in order to receive public services? I guess I haven’t paid my taxes all these years.”

“I can’t understand why you refuse to refer her to Mayview,” Elizabeth says to Debbie Rubin.

“It is not clear to me that Megan is not going to Mayview,” Rubin replies calmly.

“What I have always hoped is that someone would take her away from us and take care of her,” says Elizabeth. “But

after North Country, I wished she was dead.” She pauses to snatch another Kleenex and wipe her eyes.

“In lieu of that—I mean instead of killing her, which is what I really want to do—I have decided to leave. To leave Tom, to leave Megan, to leave Doug—everybody. It’s not pretty, it’s not right, but that’s all there is. I have begged for help. I have demanded help. But I can’t do it anymore. I can’t go on. I’m leaving home.”

“I have been watching you out of the corner of my eye,” Debbie says to Tom. “What are you thinking?”

“I am sitting here listening to my death sentence,” he replies.

“Yours or Megan’s?”

“If Megan comes home, Elizabeth will leave me. I feel like someone is passing a life sentence over me for a crime I did not commit.”

Tom remembers the last time Elizabeth left him—an incident precipitated by the same question with which they are attempting to deal today: What to do with Megan? It had occurred the summer following her expulsion from North Country. Because of continued warfare between the two children, Doug and Megan could not be at home alone at the same time, and the Scanlons had exhausted their pool of babysitters willing to go head-to-head with Megan.

Because Doug was younger, it was easier to find child care for him outside the home, although at thirteen, he had had enough.

“One afternoon, Douglas and I were having a rather loud discussion about the problem,” said Elizabeth. “I was upset and he was upset and we weren’t coming to any good conclusions. Megan suddenly started telling me how I should have handled the situation.”

Elizabeth had always known deep in her heart that sooner or later she would reach a point of no return—a moment when her daughter’s unyielding assaults upon her would force her either to lose her mind entirely or to flee.

Meggan had always been able to hurt her by instinctively saying the things to which Elizabeth was most sensitive. "I've talked to other mothers with kids like Meggan. They all relate the same kind of thing. Sometimes you know damn well you did wrong, but it's extraordinarily painful to listen to." Ordinarily Elizabeth would have fought back, or locked herself in her room. But Meggan had picked the absolute worst moment to launch an attack. "I left the house and moved in with a girlfriend."

Although Tom understood that Elizabeth had reached a breaking point—and needed respite from Meggan—the days he remained alone as a single parent had been devastating. "There were days when I went to work and could barely function. The night that Elizabeth left I just sat and cried the whole night. Meggan made fun of me. She said, 'You're acting like a jerk. She'll be back. What are you worried about?' Doug was as upset as I was. He went into his room and cried. I sat on the bed and cried with him. Meg went out and chose not to come home until midnight without telling me where she was going. I could have just killed her." Tom snaps a Kleenex from the box and dabs the tears from his eyes. He buries his face in his hands.

"I simply have to get away because I get afraid that I'm just going to die, that this situation with Meggan is going to kill me, that she is killing my soul," says Elizabeth. "It sounds really awful. I feel helpless and out of control. I can barely talk when Meggan is home, because I don't have anything to offer her anymore. I visualize myself as one of the shadows on the street after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I saw the pictures of those people who were just mere shadows on the pavement. That's how empty I felt when I had left Tom. I felt like there was nothing there. I had no presence. I was a shadow on the pavement. I had to get out."

"My best friend is divorced. She's been on her own for years. She goes home every night to a quiet apartment and

plays whatever she wants on the radio—something wonderful. You go over there and it's quiet. Oh my God! I can remember going to see her at lunch and crying and saying, 'I want your life. I just want your whole life. I'll give up everything else. Let me have it.' It's becoming harder and harder to function, to get through the day. I have to get" She searches for the words, but Rubin finds them: "You have to get away from Meggan—your daughter."

"That's right."

"And you are willing to sacrifice your relationship with Tom?"

"I will never sacrifice my relationship with Tom. But don't you see? My feeling for Tom is deep inside of me, and it will never go away. Practically, I can live without him."

"But can Tom live without being with you?"

"No, he can't."

"So what is going to happen to Tom if you leave?"

"What is going to happen to me," asks Elizabeth, "if I stay?"

Debbie Rubin's shoes have been on and off four times in the past ten minutes. Her voice becomes high-pitched during such tense moments, and she has the tendency to press her chin on her fist and mumble, forcing Tom to lean forward. "I can't hear you," he says.

"The sad part about all of this," says Rubin, repeating herself, "is that your guilt over giving up Meggan is not going to go away even if you are successful in placing her somewhere. You will both always feel like beasts."

"She makes me feel like a hostage," says Elizabeth. "Any moment, she is going to take her hot poker out and burn me again. I can't explain it to people. She makes me feel like a battered wife. I can't deal with her. I can't deal with a child who relishes my hurt. The more that I hurt, the happier she is. There ought to be shelters for battered mothers to protect them from their children. I cannot continually be terrorized by a child. The cost is too high."

"So listen to me," says Debbie Rubin. "I think that the one person who has gotten you through all of this is Tom."
"That's absolutely true," says Elizabeth.
"But you want to leave him?"

"Tom can't protect me from her. He wants to, but he can't." Elizabeth raises her voice. "I won't look for a new husband, and he won't be looking for a new wife. I will be with him in heart and spirit for the rest of my life."

She is sobbing hysterically. She begins to choke. The four of us sit in silence while she calms herself. "Life wasn't really supposed to be this hard. It really wasn't," she finally says.

"We will work together and do all we can to accomplish your objective. We will make phone calls to anyone who will listen. We will fight the fight together," Rubin tells them.

"What kind of time frame are we talking until you send her home?" Tom asks abruptly.

Rubin remains calm, but she is clearly perplexed. "I keep trying to tell you that I don't know that we are going to send her home. We're talking the worst-case scenario—home. We know that we can keep her for another month—we have our ways to do that, to sway the insurance company. And there's a chance to get her into Mayview for anywhere from three to nine months. And then maybe group homes."

Tom's face is red and wet. His voice is choked and weak. "For God's sake, Debbie, get her in there—to Mayview. Get her anywhere. Just for a while. Please."

"Maybe we should sell the house and move into an apartment, take all the money that's left and send her to school for one more year," says Elizabeth.

"I'll do that, happily," says Tom. "I'll do anything," he adds.

Now Tom is sobbing. Elizabeth is crying quietly. Debbie Rubin watches them both, playing with her shoes and pressing her fist into her face.

Tom says, "I have never been happier in my life than I have been with Elizabeth."

"Then you have to fight for what you want, Tom," Debbie Rubin says.

"I'm trying," says Tom. "I am fighting with all my power."

"There's a limit to my strength," says Elizabeth. "I must have peace."

"How peaceful will it be without Tom?"

"The only other solution that I can think of is suicide," says Elizabeth.*

3.3 "Inner" Point of View

Note that these conversations not only contain description—what is happening in the room and what the characters look like as they talk—but also an inner point of view. In other words, readers see the world through the eyes of the characters whose lives are being dramatized.

The veterinarian scene vividly portrays Dr. Solomon, who is clearly going through the motions of supplying the best service to a client who is not particularly considerate of a pet she truly loves. But the creative nonfiction writer can also take the opportunity to capture a character's feelings directly:

As we leave the examination room and walk down the hall toward his office, Solomon's face reddens and he shakes his head with disgust. "How many times has she been here?" he says, flipping the pages of the chart. "Twenty times? Thirty times? And what's the first question I asked her on her first visit?" he flips back to the beginning of the chart. "Diet. 'What do you feed your dog?' We go through this every time at anywhere from \$75 to \$250 a visit. And she will not listen. I would pay her the \$75 or \$250 if she would only listen—just once."

*From Lec Gutkind, *Stuck in Time*, © 1993. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

In the Scanlon scene, you feel and see the confusion and panic as you view the awful frustration of their lives through their own eyes. You also hear Elizabeth's agonized threat of suicide. But to elongate tension and point of view, there can be a second or third scenic "twist."

With the exception of playing with her shoes, Debbie Rubin has skillfully led the session without exhibiting a great deal of emotion. She has been warm, attentive, and responsive. Even now, Rubin does not change her expression. She maintains eye contact with the distraught mother. Rubin knows that suicide is not a new idea for Elizabeth, for she has previously admitted to Debbie that she considers death a viable option to living with Meggan. But this time, she has added another frightening wrinkle to her destructive scenario.

"You would leave Tom and Doug with that legacy of suicide?" Rubin asks her.

"No," says Elizabeth calmly. "My new idea is that we will all three make the choice of going together."

Remember: The creative nonfiction writer may not employ "literary license"—the writer may not alter truth to enhance the story or the dramatic narrative. In other words, writers cannot create conversations that did not happen—or even dramatically embellish upon those that did happen. But in creative nonfiction, the writer is encouraged to capture the drama and force of real life, in the most literary way possible.

The creative nonfiction writer is encouraged to utilize all the literary techniques available to the fiction writer in order to render his or her true story as dramatic, appealing, and compelling as possible.